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Viewing cable 10BEIRUT108, INFORMATION MINISTER PRESSURED TO ATTACK

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
10BEIRUT108	2010-02-03 14:38	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000108

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PPD, EEB/CIP
E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/29/2020
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: INFORMATION MINISTER PRESSURED TO ATTACK
ANTI-HIZBALLAH HR 2278

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Minister of Information Tareq Mitri informed the Ambassador on January 27 that President Sleiman continues to be personally interested in the issue of House Resolution 2278 regarding satellite providers broadcasting channels

carrying anti-American incitement to violence. Mitri said that most Arab League Information Ministers fear that such a bill would only serve to strengthen the radicals in their calls to violence. Mitri revealed that he has been pressured by Hizballah to take a more active, public role in attacking the resolution. Mitri also offered insights to the workings of the new Lebanese cabinet, but said that its true tests remain in front of it. End Summary.

ARAB LEAGUE FEARS RADICAL SATELLITE CHANNELS, TOO

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and PAO met with Information Minister Mitri at the ministry on January 27. He had recently returned from the Arab League Information Ministers meeting in Cairo on January 24, where the topic of HR 2278 and its proposed sanctions on satellite companies was the main topic of debate. Mitri said that most ministers felt that proposed legislation such as HR 2278 would "make their lives more difficult," giving radicals another weapon in their arsenal to radicalize others. He offered that all of the ministers needed to be seen as defending the freedom of their satellite companies even though, as Mitri opined, "the content of these broadcasts do more harm here than in the United States." Mitri said that both Arabsat and Nilesat, the two main satellite providers in the Arab world, felt that they could not be held responsible for the content of the broadcasts on the channels they transmit. After all, said Mitri, "if they are licensed in their home countries, it's not (the satellite companies') problem."

¶3. C) While his fellow ministers had harsh criticism for the bill, Mitri asserted that he was the main drafter of the statement released after the January 24 meeting and was the one responsible for adding the mitigating language in the second part of the statement, condemning all media that incites violence and terror. Mitri explained that most of his fellow ministers present were committed to fight against extremism and elements in their countries that incite violence, while maintaining a caveat for "legitimate resistance." (Note: He specifically excluded the Syrian information minister. End note.) Mitri expects that the issue of HR 2278 will be on the agenda of the Arab League Heads of State summit, scheduled for March in Libya.

HIZBALLAH PRESSURES ON HR 2278, 'CLEANS UP' AL-MANAR

¶4. (C) Mitri met recently with the Lebanese parliament's media committee, which is chaired by Hizballah MP Hassan Fadlallah, to discuss the GOL's reaction to HR 2278. Mitri relayed that he was "ridiculed" by the Hizballah deputies in a "silly way" for holding a view that Obama's election would mean an improvement for U.S.-Arab relations. Mitri also talked in detail on how Hizballah had approached him in his role as information minister to enlist his help in their campaign against HR 2278. Mitri said that he was under great pressure to go to Washington to hold consultations with the USG regarding Lebanon's objection to the resolution. He noted that he really did not "want to go, but Hizballah folks are really very smart about this." Mitri described a three-phase strategy Hizballah employed with him personally to try to get his buy-in. First, they appealed to his sense of duty to protect Lebanon's freedom of speech, saying that as information minister he was the key state player in this regard. Second, they told Mitri that he was "a very smart man, and they could use his intelligence" to come up with a strategy. Third, Hizballah officials suggested to Mitri that since he "knew the Americans" he could use his friends and contacts in the U.S. to advocate on Lebanon's behalf on this issue. They even went so far as to ask if he would look into contacting a lobbyist firm to act on Lebanon's behalf.

¶5. (C) Mitri said Al-Manar had been undergoing a concerted effort to "clean up its act," especially in the wake of actions taken by France to close French airwaves to its broadcast. Mitri relayed a conversation he recently had with the chairman of Al-Manar regarding the station's operational

standards. During the meeting, the Al-Manar representatives claimed that the channel makes a distinction between incitement to violence against American interests and opposition to USG policy. Al-Manar claimed that its editorial board has banned incitement to violence. Mitri challenged the Al-Manar representatives on this point by saying the Al-Manar's motto seems to be "Death to America," as this chant can be heard on Al-Manar on nearly a daily basis. Al-Manar's chairman countered that this was not incitement to violence, rather it was just Al-Manar reporting on protesters who shout that slogan.

16. (C) Mitri also produced a copy of an Al-Manar document that seemingly sets broadcasting standards for its employees, including rules limiting the depiction of "real or fictive violence" for fear of "desensitizing viewers to violence." Mitri offered that all of those efforts were aimed at avoiding punishment by the international community. However, he opined, Hizballah has begun to "outsource its trash" to other media outlets in Lebanon, especially the pro-Hizballah newspaper, Al-Akhbar. Mitri could not disguise his disgust for Al-Akhbar, describing it as "without ethics or guidelines."

17. (C) The Ambassador asked what role the Ministry of Information had in enforcing journalistic standards. Mitri explained that he had attempted to start a dialogue with news directors and editors at Lebanese newspapers and television stations about establishing a code of ethics, based on the thought that code would be more efficient and encourage higher levels of self-accountability. While Hizballah's media elements remained largely silent during the meeting, pro-Hizballah Al-Jadid TV and Al-Akhbar newspaper both insisted that any such code should include not only the Ministry's list of "do not's" (i.e. not reporting hearsay, not using inflammatory language, etc.), but also a list of "do's" (i.e. do report in a way that supports "the resistance" etc.). The minister said that he had "almost given up" on attaining positive progress on this issue, given that the power to enforce most of Lebanon's audio-visual laws rests in the hands of the quasi-governmental National Media Council, whose members were all chosen during the Syrian occupation.

NEW CABINET DYNAMICS

18. (C) Mitri said the current cabinet was working together "better" than the previous cabinet (in which he was also information minister), describing the atmosphere of good will as a "truce" arising from a "unilateral cease-fire from the March 14 ministers." Mitri said that the March 14 ministers had conscientiously undertaken a campaign of "kindness" to the opposition, which as been reciprocated by Hizballah but not all other opposition ministers. Mitri said that Hizballah leaves "other ministers to use harsh words" during cabinet discussions, allowing Hizballah to act as the "wise man" and present a compromise. Mitri revealed that there were two FPM ministers who are always "in the trenches waiting to react" negatively to initiatives from March 14, and who are quick to fall back on "ideological positions and refer to conspiracy theories" regarding PM Hariri's agenda. While he did not reveal their names, Mitri added that one of them was not Gebran Bassil, whom he characterized as having a constructive role in the cabinet.

19. (C) Mitri also noted the peculiarity of President Sleiman's continued presence as chair at more than 80% of the cabinet meetings held during his term in office. Traditionally, the PM and president alternate this role, he said, although the Lebanese constitution does not explicitly define the division of labor between the two positions in this regard.

110. (C) Mitri was cautiously optimistic of the potential for this cabinet to move forward on major issues, although he said the pace of its work was slow and inefficient. "Consensus does not mean mutual veto," Mitri said,

criticizing the cabinet's habit of discussing issues at length and then postponing a decision. Mitri said the real test of the new cabinet would come when it takes up the issue of the pending civil service appointments. He fears the cabinet becoming a "Loya Jirga" insofar as it would act only to "rubber-stamp" backroom agreements reached by Lebanon's political elites, rather than fulfilling its role as the proper venue to debate issues of national importance. Mitri lamented "either we are in a democracy or we're not. If we're not, let's tell the people."

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